

Command Decision

By Timothy Zahn; illustrations by Doug Shuler and Mike Vilardi

They had left the Core Worlds a dozen jumps ago, setting off across the Outer Rim Territories with its barbarians and non-human monsters and thinly-veiled contempt for the glory and benevolence that was the Empire. Four jumps ago they had left behind even that pale caricature of civilization to enter the sparsely charted region called Wild Space. Now, with this final jump, the Imperial Star Destroyer *Admonitor* had left even that behind.

Ahead of them lay the Unknown Regions. Behind them lay the Empire. And, for all practical purposes, the ruins of their careers. "Forward sensors reporting, Captain," an officer called from the starboard crew pit. "No signs of spacecraft."

"Acknowledged," Captain Dagon Niriz said, glowering out the bridge viewport at the dull red sun glowing in the near distance. The dying embers of a once glorious star. How very symbolic. "Launch TIE fighter squadron," he ordered. "As per the admiral's orders."

"Yes, sir."

There was a footstep beside him. "Well, there it is," General Larr Haverel commented. "Our new tour of duty. Looks so very inviting, doesn't it."

"Looks so very like slow death," Niriz said bluntly.

"Yes," Haverel murmured. "I suppose slow death is just what happens when you come down on the wrong side of Imperial Palace politics."

Niriz nodded sourly. He'd seen it happen himself, time and time again: intrigues and squabbles among the aides and advisors and sycophants of the Imperial court as they forever jockeyed for the Emperor's ear and favor. The tension between two sides could sometimes build for years, then suddenly come to a head and be over in a matter of days or even hours, with the loser and his allies either executed or -- if the winners were feeling particularly lenient that day -- sent packing off to effective exile on some mudwater world like Abregado or Tatooine.

And the admiral had been right in the middle of the game, so the gossip said, playing it with zest and a certain degree of finesse. To have pulled this exploration/mapping assignment in the Unknown Regions, he must have lost big.

But that was no reason why Niriz and Haverel and the rest of the *Admonitor's* crew had to lose with him. No reason at all.

Out of the corner of his eye, Niriz saw the officers in the starboard crew pit stiffen, their attention shifting aft. Niriz stayed where he was, watching the dark shapes of the TIE fighters as they realigned into search formation, until he heard the soft footstep on the command walkway behind him. "Admiral," he said, only then turning around.

It was indeed, as he'd surmised, Admiral Thrawn. "Captain," the admiral said in that carefully cultured voice of his. "Report."

"We've arrived, sir," Niriz said shortly, eyeing him with the mixture of fascination and distaste that had followed Thrawn ever since Captain Voss Parck had found him on some mudwater planet out here in the Unknown Regions and brought him back to the Imperial Court. Basically man-shaped, Thrawn's blue skin and glowing red eyes nevertheless marked him emphatically as an alien. And the Emperor did not like aliens.



Parck should have been disciplined or executed on the spot for that kind of arrogance. The only reason he hadn't been was that Thrawn had apparently turned out to be quite a competent tactician and strategist. He'd been given private Academy training, risen with dramatic speed through the ranks, and ultimately been made a command officer.

The Emperor had tolerated his presence. Why, Niriz would never know. Others in the court -- a great many others -- had not.

"Yes, I see that," Thrawn said dryly, those glittering eyes shifting momentarily over Niriz's shoulder. "But those fighters should be further out by now. How soon after our arrival did you order them launched?"

"Immediately, sir," Niriz said, striving to keep his voice civil. Whether he liked this assignment or not, he was still an Imperial officer and he obeyed orders. "There might have been some trouble with the pre-launch checklist -- the crews aren't used to dealing with the hyperdrives on these new TIE scouts."

"If so, it's a deficiency they need to correct," Thrawn said. "Launch practice, Captain, beginning now. Please see to it personally."

Niriz ground his teeth. "Yes, sir," he managed, catching the eye of the comm officer. "Call Commander Parck to the bridge."

"Yes, sir."

Niriz looked back at Thrawn, a small touch of spiteful satisfaction flickering through him. Parck might not have been disciplined at the time but Thrawn's enemies hadn't forgotten him. Once the captain of his own *Victory*-class Star Destroyer, he'd been summarily stripped of that command, demoted to commander, and put aboard the *Admonitor* as Niriz's first officer. Served him right.

The admiral was watching him, an unreadable expression on his alien face. "I gather, Captain, that you don't consider this mission worthwhile."

"No, sir, I don't," Niriz said, lowering his voice out of habit to keep his words from the ears of those in the crew pits. Differences between senior officers were none of the lower ranks' business. "If I may speak freely, I think it's a complete waste of the Empire's time and energy and resources. With reports of unrest cropping up all across the Empire, sending a fully equipped Star Destroyer out here on mapping duty is just plain stupid."

"Perhaps," Thrawn said. If he was offended by Niriz's boldness, his expression didn't show it. "On the other hand, the Empire is a living entity. All living entities must grow if they're to survive."

"There's plenty of room for growth within our own borders," Niriz countered. "There must be hundreds of worlds back there we've hardly even glanced at."

"The Exploration Corps can deal with those," Thrawn said with a hint of disdain. "The Unknown Regions are the future of the Empire, Captain. It's only fitting that the Imperial Fleet lead the way."

Niriz bit down on his tongue. Thrawn was putting a good front on it, he had to give him that. Perhaps he'd even convinced himself that he hadn't in fact lost that last political fight. "Of course," he said aloud. "Sir."

A movement at the archway leading to the aft bridge caught his eye: Commander Parck had arrived. "With your permission, Admiral, I'll start the hangar bay crews on their practice."

"Very good, Captain," Thrawn said, his eyes again on the starscape outside. "Have them concentrate on pre-launch drills for the moment. I don't think we'll be spending more than an hour or two in this system, and I don't want the TIEs caught outside when we're ready to jump."

"Yes, sir," Niriz said. Stepping past the blue-skinned alien, he stalked back down the command walkway, seething quietly to himself. To send the ship's captain to deal personally with TIE fighter crews was almost as demeaning as a public slap in the face. No wonder Thrawn had gotten himself exiled out here. The only mystery was what had taken the Imperial Courtiers so long to do it.

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They were on their fifteenth system when they found their first sign of intelligent life. Or rather, when it found them.

"There are three of them, Captain," the sensor officer reported. "About twenty-five meters long -- roughly the size of an Oracaian customs frigate. Unfamiliar configuration; unknown weaponry."

"Acknowledged," Niriz said, standing on the command walkway with Thrawn and Parck and gazing out at the approaching spacecraft. An alien design, but with the compact and nimble-looking shape of fighters. One squadron of TIE fighters was already on their way out of the hangar bay, with a second standing by. "TIE control: order advance squadron to warn them back."

"Countermand that," Thrawn said before the officer could acknowledge. "Advance squadron is to take up open escort formation ahead of the *Admonitor*. Comm officer, key external signal to my comlink."

He pulled his comlink cylinder from one of his tunic chest pockets. "I trust you realize those ships out there are probably armed," Niriz warned him.

"Oh, I'm sure they are," Thrawn agreed.

"Then shouldn't we do something about that?" Niriz asked, striving for patience.

"We're at full battle alert," Thrawn reminded him. "For now, that should be sufficient." He lifted his comlink and thumbed it on. Unidentified spacecraft, this is the Alderaanian Colony Ship *Admonitor*. If you understand, please respond."

He switched off the comlink. "*Colony Ship*?" Niriz repeated with a frown.

"We're a rather imposing sight," Thrawn pointed out. "I don't want our size to frighten them away."

Niriz looked back at the approaching fighters. Not only did the admiral not want to fight, he didn't even want to worry them. Maybe he'd change his mind when they blew off the command superstructure. "And you're expecting them to understand Basic?"

"They're close enough to Wild Space to have run into traders or smugglers from the Empire," Thrawn said. "If they haven't, I know a couple other languages we can try."

Abruptly, the bridge was filled with noisy static. "Hello, Colony Ship," a wheezing voice said. "I am Creysis, ruler of this system and lord of all I survey. How dare you invade my realm without my permission?"

"More ships," the sensor officer called. "Incoming from around that small moon to portside. Twenty... thirty ... thirty-eight of them total. One larger ship, bulk freighter size, falling in behind them."

"Launch second TIE squadron," Niriz ordered. "And have two more squadrons prepped immediately."

"Countermand that," Thrawn said again. "Have advance squadron pull back to tight escort formation."

"Sir, I strongly suggest you reconsider," Niriz said, one hand clenching into a frustrated fist. Did this blue-skinned alien understand *nothing* about standard tactics? "The whole purpose of a fighter screen is to engage the enemy at a safe distance and force him to disclose his weaponry."

"I'm aware of that, thank you," Thrawn said, his attention clearly on the approaching fleet. "Don't worry, they're not going to attack. Not until they have a better idea of *our* capabilities."

He switched on his comlink again. "Our apologies, Creysis," he said. "We didn't realize we were intruding. We'll leave at once, of course, as soon as our exploration ships are back aboard."

The static returned. "I accept your apologies," Creysis wheezed. "What exactly is it you seek?"

"A new home for our colonists," Thrawn said. "One which would not intrude on you or anyone else, of course. Would you happen to know of any such worlds?"

"I might," Creysis said. "Perhaps we should meet personally for a discussion."

"That would be most generous of you," Thrawn said. "May I offer the hospitality of the *Admonitor* for a meeting?"

"As a token of my trust, I will come," the wheezing voice said. "I will have my transport prepared at once."

"I'll look forward to meeting you," Thrawn said. "Farewell."

He switched off the comlink and returned it to his chest pocket. "Order two TIEs to remain outside to escort our visitor into the hangar bay," he instructed the fighter control officer. "The rest will return to the hangar bay but remain on alert. All stations will continue at battle readiness."

"Yes, sir."

"Commander Parck, you'll stay here," Thrawn continued. "Captain Niriz, come with me. We have preparations to make before our guests arrive."

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Niriz hadn't expected Creysis to be naive enough to board an unknown ship alone, and he was right. When the piercing squeal of the alien gas-drive landing jets finally faded away there were five alien ships resting on the Number 3 hangar bay deck: four of the fighters they'd first encountered forming a square around a smaller one-man craft.

Or rather, a one-alien craft.

The being that emerged was large, ungraceful, and -- in Niriz's opinion -- fairly revolting. His misshapen head was hairless and noseless, with oval eyes that seemed to be set too far apart across its face and a puckering mouth ringed with undulating, worm-like tentacles. From a distance his skin appeared pinkish; close up, Niriz could see that it was in fact a creamy white background covered with a crisscrossing pattern of delicate red lines. He was dressed in a long vest of dark-furred animal skins sewn together in an apparently haphazard pattern. Hanging around his neck on a cord was a bent teardrop pendant of gold scattered with colored gems; strapped conspicuously at his side was a large hand weapon. "I am Creysis," he wheezed as he lumbered across the deck toward the Imperials waiting for him. "Which one commands?"

"I do," Thrawn said, taking half a step forward. "I am called Thrawn. This is Captain Niriz, in command of the *Admonitor* itself."

"Ah," Creysis said, coming to a stop two meters away. For a moment the mouth worms wiggled a little more vigorously, perhaps sampling odors or sounds. "How many colonists have you?"

"Forty thousand," Thrawn said. "Plus seven thousand crewmen who run the ship. Do you know of any planets nearby we might be able to colonize?"

"Not so quickly, red-eyes," Creysis said, his eyes narrowing to slits. "Before talk do you not honor me with a gift?"

"Of course," Thrawn said, signaling to one of the troopers hanging a few meters back. The other stepped forward and handed the admiral a small box. "I see from your pendant that you appreciate beautiful things," Thrawn said, opening the box and lifting out a delicately carved golden sculpture. "Please accept this as a token of our honor toward you."

"It is indeed beautiful," Creysis said, not making a move to take it. "But my wish was for a different gift."

"My apologies," Thrawn said. "Have you any suggestions?"

"One of those." Creysis lifted his right arm, bent tightly, and pointed the elbow toward one of the TIE fighters standing ready.



Thrawn shook his head. "I'm sorry, but I can't give you one of those," he said. "We have a limited number of exploration ships, and the path we will have to take before we reach our final destination is still very uncertain. If it would soothe your feelings, though, I could offer you a second or even a third sculpture. We have many such items aboard for use as trade goods."

"That will not be necessary," Creysis said. Again the mouth worms wiggled; then, with an elaborate shrug that seemed to start at his hips and run all the way to the top of his shoulders, he stepped forward and plucked the sculpture from Thrawn's hands. "Perhaps when you have settled to your new world you will have an exploration ship to spare me."

"Perhaps," Thrawn said. "Though that would of course depend on how quickly we find such a world."

"Of course," Creysis agreed. "Have you a list of parameters for the world you seek?"

"I shall convene the Council of Colonists immediately," Thrawn said. "I'm sure they'll be able to come up with a proper list."

"Prepare it at your leisure," Creysis said, taking a step back toward his transport. "Make sure it is exactly what you want. When it is ready, you may bring it to me at my command ship." The worms wiggled. "When you come, be certain you are also prepared to strike a bargain."

"What do you mean, a bargain?" Niriz asked.

Creysis eyed him. "Do you expect a world for free, white-head?" he sniffed, the wheezing taking on an edge of contempt. "If you wish your journey shortened by me, you must pay for the information."

"I understand," Thrawn assured him. "The Council of Colonists will arrive fully prepared to deal with you."

The mouth worms stiffened one last time, then Creysis turned and stalked into his ship. Thrawn motioned the Imperials back and with another gale blast of gas-drive landing jets, the five alien ships lifted from the deck and made their way out the hangar entry port. "Evaluation, Captain?" Thrawn asked.

"They're obviously primitives," Niriz sniffed, strongly tempted to quote for him the old Imperial dictum that all non-humans were primitives. "Animal-skin clothing, and rather haphazardly put together."

"Yet the seam lines were straight and used a slender thread," Thrawn said. "I'd say the unevenness in the pattern was likely part of the style. Anything else?"

"They don't seem to have repulsorlifts," Niriz said. "But they make up for it in weaponry. I counted at least ten laser barrels on each of those fighters."

"Ten barrels, yes," Thrawn said. "But I suspect no more than two of them were actually lasers. The tips on the other eight looked more suited to projectile weapons or even focused sensors. What about our visitor himself?"

Niriz looked out at the departing alien ships, wanting very much to tell Thrawn that none of this was really very important. But something in the admiral's tone or manner demanded a thoughtful answer. "Very confident," he said. "Arrogant, even. Typical of a barbarian leader, whether he's got anything to back up the bluster or not. You're not seriously going to send a delegation into his ship, are you?"

"He was willing to come here," Thrawn pointed out. "Refusing to reciprocate might be taken as an insult."

Niriz snorted. "I imagine you can guess how much I care about *that*."

"More to the point, we're here to explore," Thrawn said. "This is our chance to learn more about these people, and perhaps learn something about the immediate area."

Niriz grimaced; but Thrawn was right. "May I recommend, sir, that we at least try to find out what we're up against. We have three sensor-stealthed assault shuttles aboard -- let me send one of them around the back of that moon and see how many ships Creysis has."

"If that was actually their main base, that might tell us something," Thrawn agreed. "But it isn't. Tell me, Captain, you've been dealing closely with the *Admonitor*'s TIE pilots for the past few days. Is there anyone in particular you'd consider especially good under fire?"

Niriz frowned, the sudden change in subject throwing him momentarily off track. "Lieutenant Klar's very good," he said. "Excellent pilot, very cool."

"Have him and two other TIE pilots report to my command room in an hour," Thrawn said. "And have General Haverel detail six of his troopers to meet with me at that same time. Same criteria."

Six men especially good under fire. Thrawn's mythical Council of Colonists, undoubtedly. "Yes, sir," Niriz said stiffly. "May I again suggest, Admiral, that this might instead be the time for a show of strength. An assault shuttle with a squad or two of stormtroopers aboard, perhaps, plus a full wing of TIEs to escort them."

"Recommendation noted, Captain," Thrawn nodded. "Carry out your orders."

Niriz clenched his teeth briefly. "Yes, sir."

Nodding again, Thrawn turned and headed at a brisk walk toward the archway leading from the hangar bay proper to the cavernous service and maintenance area behind it. The bustling activity seemed to part before him, service techs and engineers stepping respectfully out of his way and, more often than not, staring furtively after him as he passed.

Muttering a curse under his breath, Niriz turned and stalked toward the turbolifts. He didn't like any of this, but service in the Imperial Fleet wasn't something you did if you happened to be in the mood that day. He and the *Admonitor* had been given an assignment; and if it meant putting up with a capricious alien commander, then they'd just have to put up with him.

At least, for now.

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"Three of the alien fighters have appeared from the far side of the moon," the sensor officer called. "Swinging around the shuttle and TIE fighter escort and dropping into an outer escort formation."

"Acknowledged," Thrawn said. "Watch for more of them."

"If they haven't all fallen asleep from boredom," Niriz muttered to General Haverel standing beside him. He and Haverel had supplied the personnel Thrawn had requested well within the admiral's specified one-hour time limit. But then, for some unexplained reason, Thrawn had taken another three hours to get this whole charade moving and out into space.

But now they were finally off. And with the alien fighters forming escort around them, the gamble had begun. With six troopers, a *Zeta*-class long-range shuttle, and three irreplaceable TIE fighters set out on the betting line.

And along with them, Commander Parck.

Niriz gazed out at the distant drive trails of the Imperial ships and the fainter drives of the alien fighters flying beside them, still not believing Thrawn had given such a risky assignment to a man who was supposed to be his friend or at least his ally. But then, perhaps Thrawn didn't see it that way. Alien minds -- who really knew how they worked?

"Creysis's command ship has made its appearance," the officer continued. "Also coming from behind the moon. Looks like a hangar bay's opened just behind and beneath the nose."

Pressed tightly against the side of his leg, Niriz's fingertips rubbed restlessly back and forth across the material as he watched Parck's shuttle maneuver into the dark opening. In the past three hours the *Admonitor*'s drift had taken it a considerable distance from Creysis's headquarters moon. If the alien was planning treachery it would be precious minutes before either the Star Destroyer or its TIE fighters could get there to help.

He'd pointed that out to Thrawn an hour ago, suggesting they at least partially close the gap. The admiral had responded with some nonsense about not spooking them, and had ignored the recommendation.

Just as he'd ignored every other suggestion Niriz had made about this whole operation. Could he really be so reckless or incompetent? Or could it be that he had some private agenda?

The glow of the Zeta shuttle's drive vanished into the alien hangar hay. "Recall the escort," Thrawn ordered. The officer acknowledged, and a moment later the three TIEs began curving away from the command ship --

And in that moment, the alien fighters abruptly struck. Abandoning their outer escort formation, they dropped in behind and around the three TIEs, lasers spitting brilliant bolts of red fire.

"Evasive!" Niriz snapped. "Helm: all ahead full. Move to intercept."

"Countermand that," Thrawn said. His voice was still calm, but it had taken on a cryogen-whip edge. "All ahead point one."

"Point one?" Niriz echoed, spinning to glare at the other. "Admiral--"

"We're supposed to be a colony ship, Captain," Thrawn said. "Colony ships are not designed for rapid acceleration."

"To blazes with that!" Niriz snarled, twisting back to look at the beleaguered TIEs. Two of them were ahead of their pursuers, slowly but steadily outdistancing them. But the third had been slower on the uptake and was lagging dangerously behind. "Look



behind you," Niriz muttered under his breath toward the other TIE pilots. Surely the other two pilots realized their comrade was in trouble. "Why don't they fire back?"

"Because I gave them orders not to," Thrawn told him coolly. "Helm, all ahead point two."

"You what? Admiral --"

"He's hit!" the sensor officer shouted.

Niriz spun back to the viewport. The lagging TIE's starboard solar panel had disintegrated in a ball of savage fire, the fighter twisting madly as its pilot fought to bring it under control. He succeeded; but the effort cost him too much speed, and the rest of his inadequate lead. Even as Niriz watched helplessly, three of the pursuing fighters swarmed around him like a flight of quamilla swooping onto a crippled redjik. There was a multiple flicker of grappling lines, and then the whole group swung around in unison into a tight curve back toward Creysis's command ship.

Niriz swore under his breath, measuring the distance with his eyes. Now that they had their prize, the rest of the alien fighters had broken off their pursuit of the other two TIEs and were also heading back home. The command ship was also turning to flee; but if Thrawn threw full power to the *Admonitor's* drive right now, they might still be able to catch the fighters and the crippled TIE before they made it inside...

"Helm, all ahead point two five," Thrawn ordered.

Niriz turned back to face the admiral, raw fury at Thrawn's indifferent bungling battling against the military etiquette instilled in him by four generations of family service to the Fleet. The etiquette won, but just barely. "Admiral Thrawn," he said, his voice almost steady. "I understand your reluctance to reveal our true nature to these aliens. But enough is enough."

Thrawn's glowing eyes might have sparked a little brighter at the word *aliens*. But when he spoke, his voice was as calm as ever. "Actually, Captain, I don't think you do understand," he said. "The other two TIEs will be returning shortly; please go to the aft bridge comm station and check on their status."

"Admiral, the command ship is moving away," the sensor officer reported. "Thirty-eight fighters have joined it, all of the ships we saw earlier. They're forming into a screened-flight configuration around the command ship."

"What's their speed?"

"One-six-five."

"Helm, bring our speed to one-six-three," Thrawn instructed. Niriz took a step closer to Thrawn. "What if they jump to lightspeed?" he growled.

"We're watching them," Thrawn assured him. "If they jump, we'll have their vector. But I don't think they will." He raised a blue-black eyebrow. "I believe you were to check on the TIE fighters."

In other words, he was dismissed. "Acknowledged, *Admiral*," he bit out.

Turning, he stalked down the command walkway and through the archway into the aft bridge. He turned toward the comm station --

"A word with you, Captain?"

Niriz turned. General Haverel was standing on the other side of the aft bridge, between the turbolift and the hologram pod. His face was tense with smoldering anger. "What is it, General?" Niriz asked, stepping over to him.

"I think you know as well as I do, sir," Haverel said, nodding his head sharply toward the main bridge. "I've got six troopers aboard that shuttle. Six good troopers. Did you know Thrawn insisted that they go there unarmed? No hold-out blasters; not even any knives."

"I didn't know that," Niriz said heavily. "But I can't say I'm surprised. He's trying to maintain the illusion that we're a harmless colony ship."

"Is he?" Haverel demanded. "Or this all something else entirely?"

"Such as?"

"Such as maybe he's made a private deal with this Creysis pirate," Haverel said bluntly.

Niriz felt his eyes narrow. "You must be joking."

"Am I?" Haverel countered. "Look at the facts. Thrawn agrees to send a contingent to talk to Creysis; but instead of sending it right away, he holds off for three hours. Meanwhile, he has the Zeta shuttle *and* one of the TIE fighters locked away in the Number Six maintenance area with about fifty techs swarming all over them."

Niriz eyed him, a cold feeling settling into his stomach. He hadn't heard anything about any work being done on the shuttle. "Which TIE was it?"

"Do you have to ask?" Haverel said darkly. "The one the aliens grabbed."

Niriz looked forward, at the admiral standing alone on the command walkway with his back to them. The man who had indeed personally arranged all this.

And who was now deliberately allowing the enemy ships to pull ahead of them. "I don't believe he'd betray us," he said, looking back at Haverel. But even to himself the words sounded hollow.

As they obviously did to Haverel, too. "What other option is there?" the general demanded scornfully. "He's given them a Zeta shuttle, a TIE fighter -- both of them probably loaded to the gills with extra technology- and is now letting them get away. *And* with eight of our men as prisoners, just as an extra bonus."

Niriz stared at Thrawn's back, the weight of four generations of service denying that such blatant treason was possible from a senior flag officer. But against that was the weight of the actual evidence. "Why would he do it?"

"Who knows?" Haverel rumbled, waving a hand in curt dismissal. "He's an alien. Worse, he's an alien from right here in the Unknown Regions. Maybe he's known this Creysis for years -- could be he even set this charade up in advance. That doesn't matter. What matters is what we're going to do about it."

The cold feeling in Niriz's stomach turned to sharp-edged ice. "What do you mean?" he asked cautiously.

"You know what I mean, Captain," Haverel said. "I'm saying that the only chance those men out there have is for us to relieve Thrawn of command."

"Or in other words," Niriz said quietly, "you're suggesting mutiny."

A muscle in Haverel's cheek twitched. "I'm suggesting that the Empire and our oaths have been betrayed," he said. "And I'm suggesting that it's our duty to set things right."

"By sedition?"

"The crime has already been committed," Haverel insisted. "And not by us. All we'll be doing is taking the *Admonitor* back for the Empire."

Niriz looked back at Thrawn again. The weight of four generations of service..."Let's give him a little more time," he said at last. "Maybe he'll -- I don't know. Come to his senses."

"It's almost too late for that," Haverel said bitterly. "It's certainly too late for the good men he sent out there to die."

Niriz took a deep breath. "We're warriors of the Imperial Fleet," he reminded Haverel. And reminded himself. "It's our duty to die when the situation requires it."

For a moment the two men gazed at each other. "All right, Captain," Haverel said at last. "You do what you have to. So will I." Turning, he stalked into the turbolift. He turned around as the door closed, giving Viriz a glimpse of his implacable expression, and then he was gone.

With a tired sigh, Niriz crossed to the comm station. The two TIEs had made it back safely, hangar bay control informed him, and the pilots would be available to talk to him in a few minutes. He waited until they had extricated themselves from their fighters, confirmed that neither was hurt and that neither fighter was damaged, and ordered them to report to debriefing.

He signed off, and for a few minutes more he stayed where he was, thinking about what Haverel had said and fighting a silent battle within himself. But there was really only one decision possible. Turning to the main bridge, he headed back down the command walkway.

It seemed a longer walk than usual before he reached Thrawn's side "Captain," the admiral said, his voice its usual smoothness. "Report."

"Both TIEs have returned safely," Niriz said, gazing out at the fleeing alien ships. Even in the short time he'd been gone, they'd moved noticeably farther away. "What's the status on Creysis?"

"Unchanged," Thrawn said. "The aliens have increased their speed to one-seven-two. We're maintaining pursuit at one-six-three." Less than a quarter of what the *Admonitor* could actually do. "Creysis is probably taking both the shuttle and the TIE fighter apart right now," he said. "I presume you know that."

"Yes."

"Possibly taking Commander Parck and his delegation apart, too",

Thrawn shook his head, an almost imperceptible movement of his head. "No, he won't have harmed them yet. Simple caution dictates that. He won't have taken them far from the shuttle, either."

Niriz frowned. He'd have thought an immediate trip to Creysis's detention center would be in order. "Why do you say that?"

"Because one or more of them could be carrying transmission cameras," Thrawn said. "Until he has a better idea of our technology level, he won't risk letting them see more of his command ship than necessary."

"Perhaps," Niriz said. "On the other hand, between the shuttle and TIE fighter, he can presumably learn all he needs to about us and our technology."

Thrawn nodded. "Presumably."

Niriz stared at that alien face, frustration simmering within him. Here he was, trying desperately to give the admiral every last benefit of the doubt. And yet here was the admiral, admitting with unashamed candor how badly he'd handled this whole operation. Did he *want* to be relieved of command?

"What it ultimately comes down to is a simple matter of trust," Thrawn said quietly. "Whether you trust me personally; whether you trust the officers who approved my promotion to the rank of admiral; whether you trust the Emperor and his decision to place me in command here."

Niriz grimaced. "It would have been easier if you hadn't mentioned that last one."

Thrawn turned to face him; and to Niriz's surprise the admiral smiled. A faint, enigmatic smile, but a smile nonetheless. "Never assume things are necessarily the way they seem, Captain," he said. "Particularly when dealing with the Emperor." The glowing eyes glittered. "Or with me."

Niriz dropped his eyes from that unblinking gaze. Haverel's doubts about Thrawn's loyalty flashed through his mind, along with his own questions about a private agenda. Or perhaps the problem was something more innocent but no less dangerous: that Thrawn had managed to convince himself that the *Admonitor*'s mission was more than just an elaborate and wasteful form of exile.

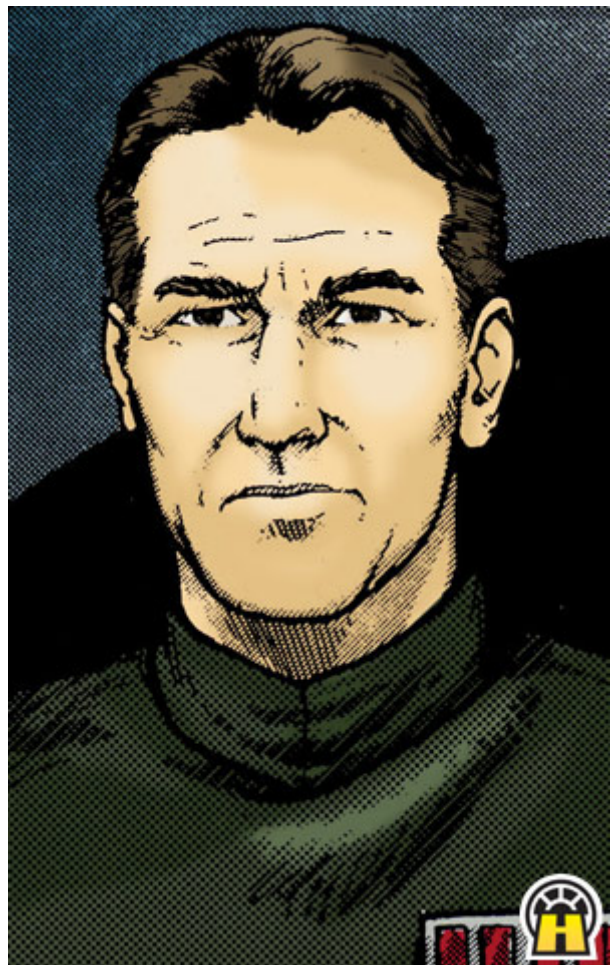
Or perhaps the Emperor and all those approving officers really had known what they were doing.

But it almost didn't matter. With those four generations of service behind him, there still was only one decision possible.

He looked up again into Thrawn's face. "Admiral, I recommend you call a stormtrooper squad to the bridge," he said. "There could be trouble."

"Yes, I know." Thrawn glanced back over his shoulder. "I believe the trouble has already arrived."

Niriz turned. General Haverel had returned and was marching stolidly toward them, a formation of six black-clad troopers following in his wake.



Halfway down the command walkway the general waved the troopers to a halt and continued on to them alone. "Admiral Thrawn," he said without preamble. "In the name of the Empire, I ask that you relinquish command of the *Admonitor* to Captain Niriz, and that you allow these troopers to escort you to your quarters."

Niriz looked over Haverel's shoulder at the troopers. Their faces were set in the expressions of men who'd been given orders they agreed with but at the same time found highly unpleasant. Behind them, the officers and crewers in the crew pits were going about their duties, apparently oblivious to what was happening here.

"I see," Thrawn said calmly. "I trust, General, that you've thought this through."

"There are men out there," Haverel said harshly. "My men. I'm not just going to abandon them."

"Your loyalty is admirable," Thrawn said. "How would you propose we rescue them?"

"Perhaps we should try attacking," Haverel said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "An Imperial Star Destroyer is supposed to be pretty good at that."

"That's enough, General," Niriz said.

"No, let him continue," Thrawn said. "All right, general, we go to full power and attack. How long do you think it would take Creysis to kill all of them when he saw us bearing down on him? Or, alternatively how long would it take him to compute a jump to lightspeed and leave us behind?"

Haverel's cheek twitched again. "Granted, it would be a risk," he said doggedly. "But sitting here doing nothing guarantees their deaths."

"That assumes I am in fact doing nothing," Thrawn said. "But leave that aside a moment. Do you propose to take command of the *Admonitor* with yourself and six troopers? Or have you polled all 47,000 of the crew to see where they stand?"

"They don't like what's happening any more than I do," Haverel bit out "Enough of them would fall into line."

"Really." Thrawn shifted his gaze to Niriz. "Would you agree, Captain?"

Niriz braced himself. "No, Admiral," he said. "I don't believe my officers will go along with mutiny." He forced himself to look at Haverel. "Nor will I."

For a long moment no one spoke. "I'm sorry," Haverel said at last. "This is something I have to do." He started to raise his hand --

"Admiral!" the sensor officer called from the crew pit. "Eight of the fighters have broken out of formation, heading off on different vectors."

Niriz turned to look out the viewport. He got just a glimpse of the drive trails heading out from Creysis's fleet before the eight fighters jumped to lightspeed. "Do we have jump vectors for all of them?" Thrawn asked.

"Yes, sir," the officer replied. "Specter Two signals primary target has gone on vector seventy-one mark five."

Niriz blinked. He hadn't been aware that Thrawn had launched any of their sensor-stealthed assault shuttles. "What are the Specters doing out there?" he asked.

"Watching for precisely this moment," Thrawn said, and there was no mistaking the grim satisfaction in his voice. "Comm officer, signal on frequency forty-six. Message: now."

Niriz looked at Haverel, who was looking as confused as he himself felt. "Admiral, if this is some belated attempt to show a little resolve--"

"It's not belated at all, general," Thrawn cut him off. "It's exactly the proper time. I want three platoons of your troopers in the hangar bay in ten minutes. There are two squads of stormtroopers already there -- they'll get them into proper position."

Haverel's cheek twitched. "Yes, sir." Turning, waving his troopers on ahead of him, he headed for the aft bridge.

"Your turn, Captain," Thrawn continued. "Order the helm to full power and stand by battle stations." His eyes glittered. "The charade is over. It's time to show them just who and what we really are."

Reflexively, Niriz came to full parade attention. "Acknowledged, Admiral."

He raised his voice. "Helm: all ahead full. Sound battle alert."

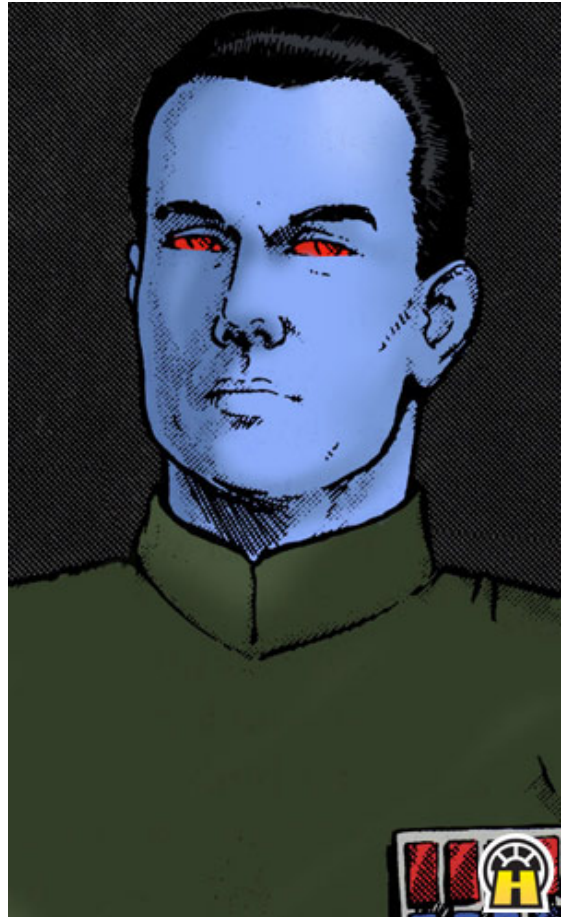
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They'd been sitting on the hangar bay deck for nearly twenty minutes now, ever since the outer hatchway doors had slammed shut behind the shuttle and the aliens had unceremoniously herded them out here, and Parck's legs were starting to feel the strain. Slowly, carefully, he eased them into a different position --

The barrel of a heavy handgun slapped warningly against the side of his head. "You not move," the alien wheezed.

One of the troopers sitting across from Parck stirred, his face darkening as he looked up at the guard. "Patience," Parck murmured, just in case the other was thinking of trying something foolish or desperate. The time for action, Thrawn had told him, would come only after Creysis's people had had time to examine the shuttle and the damaged TIE fighter they'd brought aboard.

From the look of things, that time must be getting close. The shuttle itself had been only cursorily looked at, but the TIE had been practically disassembled. The pilot, Lieutenant Klar, had been over there with the aliens most of the time, a pair of weapons jammed into his ribs as they kept up their running interrogation. From where he sat Parck couldn't hear either the questions or Klar's answers; he could only hope Thrawn had coached the pilot on what he was or was not to tell them.



Across the way, a door irised open and Creysis stepped into the hangar bay. Parck eyed him as he lumbered toward the group of prisoners, but the alien expression was impossible to read.

The effort turned out to be unnecessary. "Parck," he wheezed, those repulsive mouth tentacles wiggling more than usual. "So you were telling truth. Foolish for you."

"What do you mean?" Parck asked.

"Your spacecraft is indeed a *po'dorj*, ripe for harvest," Creysis said, pointing with his elbow in the direction of the outer hatchway. "Slow and feeble and full of good things. Soon it will be in the grip of the Ebruchi."

"Ah," Parck nodded. "So that's what you call yourselves, is it? The Ebruchi? We'd wondered about that."

The mouth tentacles momentarily stopped their movement. "Do you not hear me, Parck?" he demanded. "I say we will take your spacecraft and all you possess."

"With what?" Parck snorted. "The ships you have here? Don't be ridiculous."

"All the Ebruchi will soon be here," Creysis snarled, or as close as the alien voice could probably get to a snarl with that chronic wheezing. "Even now messengers have flown to summon them to the kill."

Parck nodded, a warm glow of satisfaction filling him. Satisfaction and the usual admiration for his commander. Once again, as he had so many times before, Thrawn had anticipated his opponent's moves down to the letter. "And what makes you think the *Admonitor* will still be here when they arrive?" he asked.

"Because even now it continues to chase us," Creysis said. "Foolishly, for it is too slow to catch us. They think to rescue you from the Ebruchi victory feast. Instead, they will lose all."

Parck swallowed. An Ebruchi victory feast. Did that mean what he was afraid it meant? "What sort of feast?"

The gloating alien never got a chance to tell him. From across the room, one of the other Ebruchi suddenly shouted.

Creysis turned and bounded over to him, moving at surprising speed for a creature of his bulk. "What's going on?" one of the troopers muttered.

"The admiral must have made his move," Parck murmured back, watching the guards out of the corner of his eye. At the moment their attention was on the animated conversation going on across the hangar bay, but that wasn't going to last much longer. "At a guess, I'd say they suddenly found out just how fast the *Admonitor* can really travel."

The trooper glanced up at the guards. "So what are we supposed to do?"

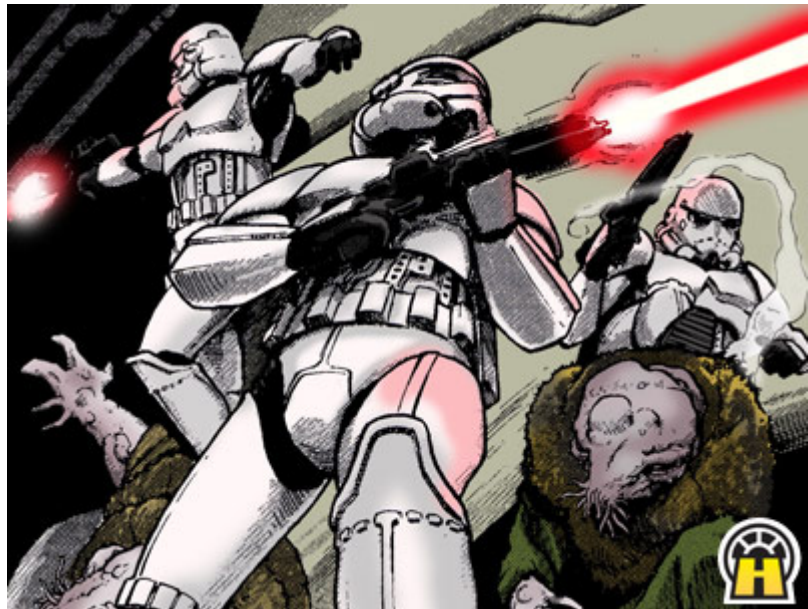
Parck smiled. "Just get ready to duck."

And with a highly gratifying punctuality, the side of the Zeta shuttle directly over the starboard fuel tank blew off.

And into the alien hangar bay swarmed a dozen stormtroopers. The first synchronized blaze of blaster fire took out the guards standing over the seated troopers. "Klar!" Parck shouted, pointing across the room to where the TIE pilot stood beside his disassembled fighter. But Klar had already hit the deck, and the stormtroopers' second volley cleared away the aliens standing dumbfounded over him.

"Commander Parck?" one of the stormtroopers called.

"We're all here," Parck confirmed, jumping to his feet and nearly falling back down again as fatigued leg muscles tried to cramp up on him. "That doorway's the only exit from the hangar bay."



"Right," the stormtrooper said. Six of his men were already moving to take up defense positions at the door, while two others were busily setting explosives to blow the outer hatchway. "Get your men aboard the shuttle."

"You heard him, troopers," Parck called. "Get moving."

* * *

"They're coming around, Admiral," Niriz called, peering out the viewport "All thirty of their remaining fighters. Definitely an attack formation."

"Acknowledged, Captain," Thrawn said, coming back forward down the command walkway from his brief private conversation with the comm officer in his crew pit. "Launch one squadron of TIE lighters to intercept."

"Yes, sir," Niriz said, gesturing confirmation of the order to the fighter control officer. "Do you think one squadron will be enough?"

"More than enough," Thrawn assured him. "With those kind of numbers, it's more important for our pilots to be able to keep out of each other's way."

"Even with the aliens fully aware of TIE fighter capabilities?"

Thrawn smiled. "They're not aware of TIE fighter capabilities, Captain. They're aware of Lieutenant Klar's TIE fighter's capabilities. There's a considerable difference."

"Ah," Niriz said, understanding at last. So that was what that mysterious three-hour delay had been about. Rather than loading extra technology aboard Lieutenant Klar's TIE as part of a secret deal with Creysis, as Haverel had feared, Thrawn had instead been removing the critical parts of what was already there.

The TIE formation was nearly to the cloud of incoming enemy fighters, outnumbered three to one by ships four times their size. Unconsciously, Niriz held his breath ...

And then the two forces collided, and the TIEs cut through the leading edge of the enemy shock force like a drive exhaust through spun snow. Eleven of the twelve targeted alien fighters were turned to instant fireballs by the Imperials' first salvo, the twelfth lasting just long enough to crab sideways into one of his comrades with a violent crash that took out both ships. The alien attack faltered, their arrogant confidence breaking visibly into sudden confusion. Taking advantage of the hesitation, the TIEs doubled back with review-stand precision, carving an equally devastating slash through the rear of the enemy formation.

"Excellent," Thrawn said approvingly. "My compliments, Captain -- your work with the pilots these past few days has been well worthwhile."

"Admiral, we have a Zeta shuttle registering now," the sensor officer called. "Bearing away from the command ship."

"Have the TIE fighters clear an escape path for them," Thrawn ordered. "All turbolaser batteries, engage enemy fighters at will, but leave the command ship untouched. Helm, prepare to jump to lightspeed; target is the first system along course vector seventy-one mark five. Tractor stations, lock on enemy command ship. I want it taken intact."

The sky outside the viewport began to light up with the blaze of the *Admonitor's* heavy turbolasers, and the already one-sided battle collapsed completely into a rout. Creysis's command ship was trying desperately to escape, zigzagging like a wounded fish as its fighter screen literally disintegrated around and behind it. But it didn't have anywhere near the *Admonitor's* speed, and within seconds the Star Destroyer had closed to capture range. "Activate tractor beams," Thrawn instructed.

"Activated," the tractor officer reported, gazing at the display over his subordinates' shoulders. "Connection... is good. We have them, sir."

"Reel it in, lieutenant," Thrawn ordered. "Order the troopers in the hangar bay to stand by for boarding. All TIE fighters are to break off and return."

Three tense minutes later, it was done. "Hangar bay reports positive docking lock on the ship, Admiral," the comm officer said. "Stormtroopers have burned through in three places; boarding has begun. All TIE fighters have returned with no casualties."

"Helm?"

"Jump calculated and laid in, sir," the officer replied briskly. "Estimated time to target system is two point five minutes."

"Acknowledged," Thrawn said. "Helm: jump to lightspeed. Fighter control--"

There was the distant rising hum of the hyperdrive, and the stars outside did their familiar surrealistic explosion into starlines. "Fighter control, confirm all TIE wings are ready to launch," Thrawn continued. "Turbolaser crews, double-check battle readiness."

Niriz nodded toward the mottled sky of hyperspace outside. "What are you expecting to find out there?" he asked.

"Whoever Creysis answers to, of course," Thrawn said. "Despite his earlier bluster, he's not the ruler of anything. Far less the lord of all he surveys."

Niriz frowned. "Are you sure?"

"Very much so," Thrawn assured him. "A genuine commander would never accept an invitation to board an unknown and possibly dangerous ship. Nor would he stay in the vicinity so long after imprisoning our vehicles and men, running from us instead of jumping to lightspeed. He was deliberately presenting himself as a target, hoping to force us to reveal the *Admonitor's* full capabilities."

"Which you of course were clever enough not to give him," Niriz said, grimacing with embarrassment at how badly he'd misread the entire situation.

"Yes," Thrawn said. A simple fact, with no undertone of pride or reproof in his voice. "Creysis is a subordinate. But he's an ambitious subordinate willing to risk his own life and those of his troops in order to gather as much information as possible before calling the rest of the pack in for the kill."

"All right," Niriz said, forehead wrinkling with concentration. "I understand that. I also understand that it makes sense tactically for us to take the battle directly to their headquarters instead of waiting for them to gather their entire force against us. But Creysis sent out eight fighters, on eight different vectors. How do you know this is the way to their headquarters?"

"It comes down to information again, Captain," Thrawn said, his tone that of an Academy instructor trying to elicit the correct response from a student. "We've established that Creysis is the sort to send all the information his commander will want or need. Not only that he's found a weak and promising target ... " He lifted one eyebrow.

And suddenly Niriz got it. "Not only that he's found a promising target," he said, "but hard evidence of just how promising that target is. That sculpture you gave him had a transponder built into it, didn't it?"

"Very good, Captain," Thrawn said, and there was indeed a note of approval in his tone. "Helm?"

"Ninety seconds, Admiral," the officer said.

"Have all stations report in," Thrawn ordered. "Whoever we find here will be in the process of mobilizing to go to Creysis's aid. When we come out of hyperspace, we'll come out fighting."

Ninety seconds later, they did.

* * *

The door to his quarters slid open, and Niriz looked up, expecting to see Admiral Thrawn step inside. It was, instead, Commander Parck. "Do you have a moment, Captain?" he asked.

"I'm likely to have a great many moments," Niriz said, suppressing a sigh as he waved the other inside. "Is that what you've come to tell me?"

"Not exactly," Parck said. "Actually, I'm here to tell you that the admiral's turned you down. May I sit down?"

Niriz frowned. "What do you mean, he's turned me down?"

"Exactly that," Parck said, pulling over a chair and sitting down. "He's not accepting your resignation as captain of the *Admonitor*."

"That's ridiculous," Niriz growled, not sure whether to be relieved or outraged. "I discussed mutiny with another senior officer -- that's a court-martial offense. If he's not going to send me back to Coruscant with Haverel, he has to at the very least demote me."

"As you may have noticed, Thrawn doesn't always consider himself bound by the manual," Parck said dryly. "Besides, all you did was talk about it. When the crunch came, you made the command decision to side with him. That's what counts."

"Is it?" Niriz demanded. "Fine -- so I sided with him this once. What about the next time he pulls one of these stunts? How does he know he'll be able to trust me then?"

Parck favored him with an odd look. "You've got it backwards, Captain," he said. "You're an honorable officer, from a proud Core World family. There's never been any question in Thrawn's mind that he can trust you."

"You could have fooled me," Niriz growled, thinking back to his conversation with Thrawn on the bridge. "If he trusts me so much, why didn't he let me in on what he was doing?"

"Oh, you were proving you were trustworthy, all right," Parck assured him. "But you weren't proving it to Thrawn. You were proving it to yourself."



He turned to gaze in the direction of the *Admonitor's* bow. "There are tremendous things out there waiting to be discovered, Captain. New species, rich worlds ripe for the taking, and any number of potential threats to the Empire. Our job is to find those threats, identify them ... and eliminate them." He looked back at Niriz. "And that's why we're here. Because Thrawn is the best."

Niriz eyed him. "So you're saying this whole thing really wasn't just the fallout from a political battle."

Parck snorted. "Hardly. I'm sure Thrawn's enemies thought so, but as usual they were at least three steps behind him and the Emperor. No, Thrawn's been wanting to bring the Imperial presence to the Unknown Regions for a long time. His enemies merely provided a convenient excuse for the Emperor to send him here without anyone knowing the real reason behind it. Eventually, depending on how quickly the Emperor can put down all these brush-fire revolts, we'll be getting more ships and men to assist us. Planting bases and garrisons; maybe even a few full-range colonies."

He smiled dreamily, his eyes taking on a distant look. "The Empire is on the move, Captain. And we're the ones who are taking it there." For a few minutes neither of them spoke. Then, hunching his shoulders briefly as if shaking himself out of a pleasant daydream, Parck stood up. "I suppose we'd best get back to the bridge," he said. "The interrogations of the surviving pirates should be finished soon, and we'll want to be available when the admiral's ready to discuss where we go next."

"Yes," Niriz agreed, getting to his feet with an inner enthusiasm he hadn't felt in years. Yes, his career undoubtedly lay in official ruins back on Coruscant. But that was all right. What faced him now was likely to be considerably more interesting. "After you, Commander."

